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SKETCH OF THE LIFE

OF

JAMES G. BIRNEY,

BY

GEN. WILLIAM BIRNEY.

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We are authorized to state, that WILLIAM BIRNEY, ESQ, *Washington City, D. C.*, second son of James G. Birney, is now engaged in writing a history of the growth, aggressions and fall of the SLAVE POWER in the United States, including notices of the prominent pro-slavery and anti-slavery men who figured before Abolition was accomplished; and that he is delayed in his work by the want of a complete collection of books and pamphlets relating to slavery. All persons owning such publications and willing to sell them, are requested to send lists of the same, with prices, to Mr. Birney.

EDITOR CHRISTIAN CYNOSURE.

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JAMES G. BIRNEY.

HIS RELATION TO THE ANTI-SLAVERY MOVEMENT AND PLACE IN HISTORY.

BY A LIBERTY PARTY VOTER OF 1840.

The advent of James G. Birney marked a new era in the anti-slavery movement. He was the first Abolitionist who, in that great division of our history which began with the Missouri Compromise and ended with the Rebellion, conceived, attempted and achieved the organization of a national party on the principles of constitutional freedom. This is not inconsistent with the facts that Lundy had steadily advocated political action against slavery, and that Holley was the most active man in the nominating conventions of 1839 and 1840. The guiding and shaping influences of the infancy of the party now known as Republican were those of James G. Birney. His public career began in the summer of 1832 and came to a close in August, 1845.

The father of James G. Birney was a native of north Ireland. When sixteen years of age he migrated to the United States. After a thorough mercantile training in Philadelphia, he made his home at Danville, a flourishing

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town in the famous blue grass region of Kentucky. There he became a leading merchant, a manufacturer, and the president of the local bank. He was intelligent and well-informed, especially in politics and history; but he was chiefly remarkable for force of character. He was a personal friend of Henry Clay and his steady supporter. He built an Episcopal church, and was punctual in attendance on Sunday mornings. He paid a large part of the rector's salary and brought him home, after sermon, to dine; but, if occasion served, he handled his theological notions without gloves. He owned about thirty slaves and lived in good Kentucky style. His wife died when the subject of our sketch was three years of age.

James G. Birney was born at Danville, February 4, 1792. From early youth he was educated with a view to a career as a lawyer and statesman. After thorough preparation by private tutors and at Transylvania University, he was sent, in 1806, to the college at Princeton, New Jersey.

That State was then passing through the experiences of gradual emancipation under a law passed in 1804. Slavery must have been frequently a topic of debate among the students, and the young Kentuckian must have become familiar with the idea of emancipation. There were Abolition societies then not only in New Jersey but in the neighboring States, and a biennial convention of them met in Philadelphia. The most illustrious men of the nation were members. Distinguished statesmen, including Franklin, Jefferson, Jay and Hamilton had been or were then members. Congress, too, was maturing the laws against the slave trade, which were passed in 1807.

For the first time in his life he was brought under the steady pressure of religious influence, and he saw the church represented by learned and able men. Though

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he did not become, during his college course, a convert either to Abolitionism or Presbyterianism, the seeds of both were sown, and they germinated many years afterwards. He was graduated with the second honor in the class of 1810. The next year was passed in travel and in making the acquaintance of the leading public men of his native State. He was much noticed by Henry Clay and the friendly relations begun then lasted many years.

In the autumn of 1811, he became a law student, at Philadelphia, in the office of Alexander J. Dallas, then United States District Attorney, and, in 1814, Secretary of the Treasury. He remained there until his admission to the bar in the spring of 1814, when he returned to Kentucky and entered at once upon the practice of the law. He had then resided nearly seven years in States in which gradual emancipation was taking place. His personal habits had been formed under the influence of free institutions, and his habits of thought were probably more cosmopolitan than was then common in Kentucky.

In 1815, he was elected to the Legislature and served two terms. In 1816, he married a daughter of Judge McDowell, United States District Judge, whose family connection was the largest and most influential one in the State. In the autumn of 1817, he removed to a cotton plantation near Huntsville, Alabama, taking with him about thirty slaves.

Having traced our hero to what was apparently a poor training school for the anti-slavery champion of 1834, let us consider what manner of man he then was. He had inherited from his father a robust and active body. He had always been healthy, bright and vigorous. The father was a frank, bold and vehement man; the son was

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courageous, and remarkable for his entire truthfulness and moral power. His manners were those of a genial and perfectly self-possessed man, accustomed to the best society. He had committed the freaks, follies and extravagances to be expected from a generous youth with an unlimited supply of money. In the South of his day, card-playing was common, and the side-board was always covered with cut-glass decanters. He was always free from the vice of tobacco chewing and profanity. He resided in Alabama fifteen years.

We will now glance hastily at certain events, bearing directly or indirectly on slavery, of the decade and a half of his Alabama residence. This was a most important epoch in the formation of our national character.

During its course, immigration began to pour into the Northern States from Great Britain, caused by the hard times resulting from the great contraction of British currency in 1819, and the industrial reaction after the Napoleonic wars. Agitation on the subject of slavery was carried on in every civilized country as well as our own. In Great Britain, the discussion of colonial slavery was revived in 1820, and it was extended, in 1823, by the organization of the English Society for gradual abolition, and the passage in Parliament of an act greatly mitigating colonial slavery. Auxiliaries were formed, conventions were held, public addresses made, bills introduced into Parliament, and the publications of the Society, in the form of tracts, were scattered broadcast over Great Britain, and found their way into the United States. The works of Clarkson and speeches of Wilberforce had a large circulation, even in this country. English newspapers were full of the subject and their articles were copied by our press more freely than at a later period. The agitation in England was greatly increased

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by the slave insurrection which took place in Jamaica in December, 1831, and caused the destruction of fifteen millions of dollars worth of property and the massacre of four thousand persons. The whole civilized world stood appalled. In 1832, the British Government adopted the principle of compulsory gradual emancipation in the colonies, and a bill to that effect was brought in and passed August 28, 1833. It went into effect August 1, 1834, and gave freedom to 800,000 slaves near our borders.

In 1826, Austria proclaimed the doctrine that any slave escaping to or brought upon her soil or upon one of her vessels became free. In the same year, Brazil passed an Emancipation Act; and in 1829, Mexico abolished slavery within her limits and extended freedom to the western boundary of Louisiana. The French Revolution of 1830 gave increased activity to the discussion of the rights of man. It was followed, in 1831, by a convention between England and France, for the suppression of the slave trade.

The Congressional debates on slavery followed each other almost without intermission during these fifteen years. Those relating to the admission of Missouri as a slave State convulsed the country. Parties were almost equally divided and the ability shown in the debate has never been surpassed. On the free State side more than thirty members distinguished themselves. Their speeches were widely circulated. The contest was carried into the next elections, and most of the Northern members who voted for the admission were not re-elected. In 1820, Congress legislated against the African slave trade; in 1822, the President called for legislation of a more strin gent character on that subject; in 1823 and 1824, Con gress discussed it at length; and in 1829, the House of

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Representatives, by a vote of 114 to 66, adopted a resolution against the slave traffic in the District of Columbia, and instructed the Committee on the District of Columbia to inquire into the expediency of gradual abolition in that District. Part of the preamble is as follows:

"Slave-dealers, gaining confidence from impunity, have made the seat of the Federal Government their headquarters for carrying on the domestic slave trade".

In 1822, a wide-spread conspiracy was formed at the South for the purpose of establishing slavery by law in the State of Illinois. To promote it, settlers with slaves were sent into the State, as they were sent into Kansas thirty years later. Resistance was made. The question was made a test one at the elections and was discussed on the stump in all parts of the State. The conspirators were finally defeated in 1824. In its day it was the sensational topic, and it kept fresh in the minds of the people the events of the great struggle of 1819–20.

In 1828, more than a thousand citizens of the District of Columbia petitioned Congress against slavery and the slave traffic; and in 1829, the Grand Jury of the District made a presentment against the latter. In 1827, abolition of slavery was finally effected in New York, and Alabama passed an act prohibiting the importation of slaves into her limits. About the same time the last vestiges of slavery disappeared in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. In Virginia there were, during the epoch under review, four years of almost continuous discussion of slavery. The State Convention of 1829–1830 gave much of its time to the subject, and the Legislatures of 1831–1832 brought out the best talent of the State in attack and defense. Very little, if anything, has since been added to the argument on either side, with the single exception that the relation of the National Government to slavery was not touched. The immediate cause of the

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debates in the Legislature was that a bloody slave insurrection, headed by Nat Turner, had broken out in Southampton county, Virginia, in August, 1831. It cost the lives of more than four hundred persons, black and white, and threw the State into the wildest commotion.

Anti-slavery literature was not wanting. The tracts, periodicals and newspapers from England were abundant. Several anti-slavery volumes had been published by Americans: one by Elias Hicks, the Quaker, 1814; another by Dr. Jesse Torrey, of Philadelphia, in 1817; a third by James Duncan, of Indiana, in 1824; and a fourth by Rev. John Rankin, a Presbyterian from Kentucky, 1824. The last was an able presentation of personal experience and observation, and had a large circulation. In 1827, George M. Stroud, a Philadelphia lawyer, published a collection of all the laws of the several States relating to slavery. For effective value, this book by Stroud ranks with Theodore D. Weld's "Slavery as it is," and Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Elizabeth M. Chandler published a book of anti-slavery poems of some merit. The different Abolition societies published addresses and reports. Among the best of these may be mentioned the *Address to the People of North Carolina* in 1830, by the State Manumission Society. It was written by William Swain. Between 1820 and 1831 there were but four newspapers specially devoted to the abolition of slavery: Benjamin Lundy's was the most prominent. He had published it in Ohio, from 1816 to 1819. Elihu Embree, in 1820, published the *Emancipator*, at Jonesborough in East Tennessee. On his death, Lundy left Ohio, where he had been publishing a similar paper, and took charge of Embree's. He removed to Baltimore in 1824, and published it there until 1830, and afterwards in Phil-

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adelphia. The other three were "*The African Observer*," at Philadelphia, "*The Freedom's Journal*," at New York, and "*The Liberal*," at New Orleans. Some of the leading newspapers discussed freely the slavery question. Among these were the Cincinnati *Gazette*, edited by Charles Hammond. William Goodell wrote a poem against slavery as early as 1820, and articles of the same kind in a newspaper at Providence as early as 1821; and Joshua Leavitt began his career in 1825 as an anti-slavery newspaper writer.

In the decade between 1820 and 1831, Abolition societies were numerous. The one established by Franklin at Philadelphia was the oldest. In 1815, Lundy had organized several in Ohio, and they had multiplied. State societies and auxiliaries existed in New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia and North Carolina. In 1826 the Manumission societies of North Carolina had three thousand members. A similar society existed in Loudon county, Va., and was active. The American Convention for Abolition met in 1823, 1826, 1828, 1829, and perhaps in other years. In 1826 it had 81 auxiliaries, of which 73 were in the South. With the mitigation of slavery and imminence of emancipation in the British colonies, the attention of the people of the Northern States was drawn more to slavery after 1823; discussion of the subject became general, and renewed activity was infused into the organization of societies. The effect of the bloody slave insurrection in Virginia in August, 1831, was to arrest this activity and enable the slave power to crush out abolition in Virginia and Kentucky, stop agitation in the slave States, get control of the political parties of the country, inaugurate mob law against Abolitionists in the North, and push the scheme for the separation of Texas from Mexico

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with a view to its annexation to the Union as five or more slave States.

In 1822 Mr. Birney gave up his cotton plantation and resumed the practice of law, and in 1823 he removed to the city of Huntsville for that purpose. He was personally popular, and was at once elected solicitor, but resigned at the end of a year because of the rapid increase of his civil business. He soon became the acknowledged leader of the bar in North Alabama, and was offered a seat on the bench of the Supreme Court of the State, but declined. After 1824 he was placed in the political minority by his adhesion to Clay and Adams. He was one of the candidates in 1828 for elector on the Adams ticket, and, to carry some local measure, he was elected about 1829 to the Legislature.

The turning point in his career was his profession of religion and connection with the Presbyterian church in the spring of 1826. The change was sincere and vital. From that time he lived on a higher plane; his sympathies were enlarged and he sought to do good. He had been a Mason, but never entered a lodge after he joined the church, and, as his sons grew up, he cautioned them against joining any secret order. He contributed liberally to benevolent enterprises, aided in establishing at Huntsville an academy for boys and an institute for girls, and was the chief actor in establishing the State University. Having been the legal counsel of the Cherokee nation, he became the efficient protector of the Indians. He favored the Alabama law prohibiting the further importation of slaves into that State. So far as appears he had never regarded slavery as a divine institution or defended it on any ground of natural right. In May, 1832, in a c nversation with Theodore D. Weld, he admitted that property in slaves

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could not be defended on any sound, legal principles. He probably always looked on it as a political evil, harmful to the whites, entailed, unavoidable and perhaps necessary in the culture of the great staple of the South. He thought it the duty of masters to be humane, not to separate families, and to provide well for the comfort of the slaves. His attention was first drawn to the subject in 1826, when an agent of the Colonization Society lectured in Huntsville. A society was formed in 1830 of which Mr. Birney became a member. On the 21st of August, 1831, there occurred the massacre of women and children, in Virginia, known as "The Southampton Insurrection." He began then to regard slavery as a constant menace and imminent danger to the South. His eyes were opened also to its corrupting influences upon the young. At that time he had seven children, six of them boys. In the winter of 1831–2 he decided to visit Illinois, with a view to a removal. This he did in the spring of 1832, and selected Jacksonville as the place of his future residence. He had advertised his property for sale when he received an unsolicited and unexpected appointment dated June 11, 1832, from the American Colonization Society, as its agent for the States of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee. The salary was very small, being about a tithe of his professional income; but he accepted in the hope of doing good. In the autumn and winter of 1832–3 he organized State Colonization Societies in four States, and lectured in their principal cities. He did not visit Arkansas.

During these journeys he learned the views of many representatives of the slave-holding interest and saw more of the workings of slavery. He returned from them with the conviction that the Colonization cause was

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hopeless in the far South; that the planters in that section were bent on maintaining slavery, would listen to no scheme of mitigation and would not tolerate discussion; that the best way to arrest the development of the evil was to stop the supply of slaves from the border States; and that emancipation in the latter should be added to Liberian colonization of freedmen from the South. This conviction was acted on with his characteristic decision. He was in possession of what was then considered a large fortune, and there was nothing to prevent him from devoting his time to the work of gradual emancipation in Kentucky. Resigning his agency, he removed in November, 1833, to his native State, where his personal popularity and influential connection gave him great advantages for his proposed work. In the December following he aided in organizing at Lexington the Kentucky Gradual Emancipation Society. Its membership comprised between sixty and seventy slave-holders. Some of them, for instance, Judge John Green, Professor Buchanan, and Dr. Luke Munsell, were men of mark and influence.

The slave-holding interest, already disturbed and alarmed by the Southampton insurrection and emancipation in the West Indies, and plotting Texas annexation, had become agitated to its depths throughout the entire South. A movement by slave-holders boded serious danger to the system of slave labor, and the necessity of suppressing it was manifest. A powerful social pressure was brought to bear upon the members of the society. The timid among them withdrew; a prominent clergyman, a native of New England, was driven from his pulpit and the State; several found it prudent to sell their property and migrate to the States north of the Ohio; and, at the end of three months,

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scarce a vestige of the society was left. It did not hold a second meeting. This pro-slavery intolerance of dissent was but the beginning of the popular feeling which culminated in the mobs and personal outrages which dishonored the five years ending with 1838 in every part of the Northern States, and in the lynchings and murders which were perpetrated in the South from 1834 until the time of the Rebellion. For a time Mr. Birney was a marked exception to the persecution. The kindly feeling towards him, as a favorite son of Kentucky, was deeply rooted. He published articles, made speeches, and held public discussions. One in the large Presbyterian church at Danville, with Dr. Young, president of Centre College, continued several days, and was attended by immense crowds. He now informed himself in all the literature, law and history of slavery. He studied carefully the National Constitution and the reported legal decisions on the subject; and he procured and read the works of Clarkson, the speeches of Wilberforce, the Parliamentary and Congressional debates on slavery and the slave trade, the works of Hicks, Torrey and Rankin, and some or all of the tracts published by the Tappans at New York. His views ripened rapidly. In May, 1834, he saw clearly that the slave himself had rights, and, as soon as the necessary formalities could be perfected, he emancipated his slaves. This marks the date of his final adoption of the Abolition doctrines towards which he had been steadily tending since August, 1831.

Becoming convinced that the Colonization Society had fallen under slave-holding influences, and had become a hindrance to emancipation, he resigned the vice-presidency of the Kentucky branch, giving his rea-

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sons for the step in a letter, which was promptly republished in a large pamphlet edition at New York and in many Northern papers, and attracted the attention of the whole country. Its effect on public opinion may be inferred from the enthusiasm of the Rev. Dr. Coxe of New York, a famous preacher. Referring to it, he said in a sermon:

"A Birney has shaken the continent by putting down his foot; and his fame will be envied before his arguments are answered or their force forgotten."

If Mr. Birney's sole object had been to damage the Colonization Society, the game was hardly worth the powder. For the fourteen years preceding 1834, the receipts of that society, needing millions for its proposed operations, had averaged only about twenty-one thousand dollars a year. It had never obtained the confidence of the American people; and the letter made this an impossibility. August 19, 1834, Elliott Cresson, the leading Colonization agent, wrote of New England that the cause had died there ingloriously. September 27, 1834, R. S. Finley, the western agent, wrote from Ohio: "The Abolitionists are gaining ground very rapidly; both in Kentucky and this State, James G. Birney has won over some of our best friends." The letter had the higher object of calling the attention of the nation to the urgent duty of taking adequate measures for grappling with an evil which was rapidly changing the character of the Republic.

The value, at that time, to the abolition cause of the accession of James G. Birney can hardly be overestimated. He was not a vain-glorious egotist, ignorant of public affairs and seeking personal notoriety by intermeddling with them. He had no personal wrongs to imbitter his spirit. He was no narrow chisel, ground by per-

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secution into razor-like sharpness. He was a liberally educated man, trained in the law and legislation, of broad, social culture, wealth and high standing; he was a Southerner, had been a slave-holder, and he knew whereof he affirmed; his remarkable candor and moral power gave great weight to his words; and a fine, personal presence commended him to all who saw him. He never overstated a proposition, misrepresented a fact, misquoted an antagonist or used needlessly an epithet. These were the qualities which secured to him the unbounded confidence of friends and the respect of enemies.

This letter was followed Sept. 2, 1834, by one appealing to the Christian sentiment of the South. The following winter and spring were passed in further studies of the legal aspects of slavery and in efforts to ascertain and rally upon some plan of organized action the opponents of slavery in Kentucky. Feeling the need of a medium of communication with them, and of explanation to the people of the State, he issued a prospectus for a weekly paper, the first number of which was to be issued on the first day of August, 1835. The ascendency of the slave-holding interest had by this time been established, and early in July a mass meeting was held at Danville, which passed resolutions pledging the persons present to prevent at all hazards the proposed publication. A large committee was appointed to confer with Mr. Birney. He declined to yield. The committee then waited on the man who owned the printing office and had contracted to publish the paper and found means to send him and his family out of the State the same night. They took possession of his office under claim of purchase, and gave public notice that any man who should thereafter contract to print Mr. Birney's paper would be summarily dealt with.

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It was soon made clear to Mr. Birney that he could neither print a paper nor hold a meeting in Kentucky, and that he could not travel in the State without losing his life. Even in his native town the change of public feeling toward him was marked. His movements were watched, his letters and mail scrutinized at the post office and the persons to whom he spoke questioned. His family, too, were subjected in some degree to what is now known as "Boycotting." The end had come. He could not remain in Kentucky. Two years of effort in behalf of his native State had demonstrated that free speech and a free press would not be tolerated within its borders. In that brief period the slave power, sensible of its danger, and preparing for its great measure, the annexation of Texas, in from five to nine slave States, had revealed its gigantic strength. It controlled the leading commercial influences of the country; it was the master of both political parties. At its bidding mobs raged in fury through the streets of Utica, New York city, and all the principal towns of the North to destroy presses and silence speakers known to favor freedom. For liberty, justice and the rights of free citizens, 1835 was the most gloomy year known to American history. As Mr. Birney expressed it, the nation was living down the foundation principles of its government. With the deepest sense of the serious danger of the supremacy of the South in the Senate, and a determination to do what he could to prevent it, he removed to Cincinnati in September, 1835, and issued his prospectus for the *Philanthropist.*

In the three years of his experience Mr. Birney had been forced by the logic of events and the revelation of the astonishing power of the slave-holding interest into a position not at first contemplated by him. Beginning with a humanitarian effort to enable freedmen in the far

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South to migrate to Liberia and save the South from the horrors of slave insurrections, passing from that to one in behalf of his native State, he found himself an exile from that State, and compelled to choose between abandoning the contest and grappling with slavery as the great moral and political evil of the nation. He did not hesitate. That he expected from the very first to accomplish his end by political means is proved by the facts already stated. He had been bred for politics, had been a public man, was a lawyer, and was thoroughly familiar with the history of slavery and emancipation. His movements for colonization and for emancipation in Kentucky had all looked to political action. He had publicly abandoned the Whig party. He was of mature age and was not a sentimentalist. His habit of thought was eminently practical; he was unable to divorce conviction from action: the firstlings of his thought were the firstlings of his hand. As a matter of fact he landed in Cincinnati with a lively sense of the imminent danger of the permanent ascendency of the slave-power in national affairs, and a well-defined intention to organize the anti-slavery men of the North for political action.

It was not long before he found that such an organization was much more difficult than he had supposed. He had been under illusions arising from ignorance of certain peculiarities of Northern thought and social action. The North had changed since his life in Princeton and Philadelphia. With the peace of 1815 there had begun a new era of material prosperity and general education. Vast numbers of immigrants had poured into the Northern States; manufacturing industries had been multiplied; turnpikes, steamboats and railroads had come into use; the busy hives of the Eastern States had swarmed to the fertile West; newspapers and magazines had quadrupled

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in number and circulation; common school systems, academies, colleges and universities had filled the North with persons of more or less education; religious newspapers were known for the first time; religious revivals were frequent; there were popular discussions, great theological debates, social reforms, Anti-masonic societies, peace societies, religious anniversaries and conventions. The lecture platform had become an institution: nearly every church opened its doors for discourses of itinerant speakers on every conceivable topic. The lecturers were of every grade of intellect and character, ranging from the polished professor of astronomy or belles lettres who attracted cultivated audiences in cities to the seedy "crank" who stole around through the country school-houses to lecture on the second advent. Most men were engaged in the feverish pursuit of wealth; they found recreation in the oratory of itinerants. They avoided politics which took too much time from business and were of no practical utility, the country being destined to prosper. Politicians were generally poor and, with a few exceptions, little respected.

Mr. Birney was sadly disappointed to find himself almost alone in his idea of political action. The rank and file of the Abolitionists belonged to the intelligent, respectable, moral and well-to-do classes, but most of them were rather sentimental than practical. They had a lively sympathy with fugitive slaves, clear notions of the way to operate the underground railroad, great repugnance to the use of cotton or other slave-grown product, a strong sense of the rights of petition, free speech and a free press, of the horror of selling men, women and children on the auction block and of the sinfulness of slave-holding generally: but the idea of voting their convictions into practical operation was not yet accepted. That seem

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ed to most of them either inexpedient or carrying a noble sentiment into "the dirty mire of politics." The lecturers were most of them earnest men; some of them were able, eloquent and effective. But as a class they were inexperienced in public affairs. It was impossible, too, to prevent the intermeddling of eccentrics. In a certain measure, these gave plausible pretexts to the enemies of the cause to associate it with erratic notions. One wanted all money abolished by law; another advocated the community system of labor; a third, slave insurrection; a fourth, a stampede of all the slaves to the North, taking all property they could lay hands on, and there were labored disquisitions to prove that this was not stealing; a fifth, the dissolution of the Union and the secession of the Northern States; a sixth, non-resistance as a philosophy, the sinfulness of all systems of force, including penal law and human government and as a corollary, the sinfulness *per se* of political parties, voting and petitioning; a seventh, the abolition of jails and dependence upon the sentiment of love alone for the restraint of thieves, ruffians, robbers and murderers; an eighth had laboriously collected all the strongest epithets in the English language to be hurled with little regard to their applicability at slave-holders and their apologists, instead of arguments; and a ninth, making the false and fatal admission that the slave-holders had the Constitution on their side, endeavored to attract public attention to themselves by stigmatizing the fundamental law as an "agreement with death and a covenant with hell." The overmastering appetite for personal notoriety greatly prejudiced the anti-slavery cause. Some of these gentlemen cultivated oddity of personal appearance: they wore Byronic collars and outlandish garments or allowed their hair to flow over their shoulders or their beards to hang over their breasts. To

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Mr. Birney these people were strange. At first he was amused. One day after listening to a gentleman with long locks who had spoken well, he said: "Now if some friend would only tell him that an Abolitionist need not out-hair a buffalo." He was accustomed to say that the stream would work itself clear in good time of these impurities.

He resided at Cincinnati two years, where all his energies were given to the work. He edited, wrote legal arguments, made the acquaintance of young men of promise, traveled, lectured, attended conventions and anniversaries, spoke to legislative committees, and did everything to consolidate and direct to practical purposes the growing anti-slavery sentiment of the country. One of his first coadjutors in the *Philanthropist* was Gamaliel Bailey, afterwards the distinguished editor. He labored long with S. P. Chase, who did not, however, identify himself with the cause until 1841. One of his chief objects in travel was to converse personally with every leading man in the ranks, with a view to harmonize action and direct it to political ends.

In 1836, the N. Y. State Anti-slavery Society passed a resolution expressing deep regret that citizens of free States should aid in electing men to office who would trample under foot the great principles of civil liberty. Finding it premature to attempt any national party organization at that time, he encouraged in his paper and by active private correspondence the practice of questioning candidates in localities where practicable, having little faith in it but hoping it would lead to something better. The results were various: discussion was caused, the attention of politicians attracted and Abolitionists led gradually into concert for political action. During these two years, his press was mobbed five times. In

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June, 1836, the mob spirit at Cincinnati was lashed to fury by visitors from the South, who made it known that the Southern trade of the city depended on the expulsion of Mr. Birney and the destruction of his press. A mass meeting of thousands was held at the Court House in the evening. The mob was to march thence, destroy the editor's house and office, and inflict violence on him. Among the numerous illustrations of his fearlessness, nerve and moral power, his conduct on this occasion may be selected for mention. Unaccompanied, except by a son seventeen years of age, he attended the meeting. At the close of a furious speech against him, Mr. Birney, who had been standing near the speaker, stepped forward and said: "My name is Birney and I ask to be heard." The wildest uproar followed, but, through the influence of Gen. Lytle, the presiding officer, quiet was restored. Mr. Birney then made one of the best speeches of his life, and retired without being molested. On reaching home, he saw that about forty pieces of firearms, which he kept there for self-defense, were properly loaded and capped. The mob did not come that night, but in his absence from town in July, it destroyed his press and the entire contents of his printing office, throwing them into the Ohio River. A number of anti-slavery meetings in different cities and towns were broken up by mobs in 1836 and early in 1837. Several times his life was endangered by personal violence. As the year 1838 wore on, however, especially after the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, the right of citizens to assemble peaceably seemed to be won, in most parts of the North. In September, 1837, Mr. Birney went to New York as the Corresponding Secretary of the American Anti-slavery Society, turning over the *Philanthropist* to the Ohio A. S. Society. That paper had been a business success from the begin-

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ning, the receipts from subscribers being in excess of ordinary expenses. Mr. Birney's pecuniary losses, however, from the mobs were heavy.

At that time he had become recognized by both friends and enemies as the chief representative of the legitimate, practical and constitutional anti-slavery movement. His intelligence, candor, firmness and moderation were known; and he was regarded as a safe guide for a cause requiring prudent and wise counsel. It is probable that his call to New York was dictated by an apprehension on the part of the Executive Committee of danger to the cause by an attempt in certain localities to identify it with the "no human government," "no-voting" and woman suffrage movements, between which, in spite of fundamental antagonism in principle, a temporary coalition had been patched up. On the 16th of February, 1838, Hon. F. H. Elmore, of S. C., at the instance of the entire Southern delegation in Congress, wrote to Mr. Birney for full information in regard to the anti-slavery movement. In a later letter, Mr. Elmore said: "I heard of you as a man of intelligence, sincerity and truth, who, although laboring in a bad cause, did it with ability and from a mistaken conviction of its justice." In his elaborate answer, Mr. Birney says:

"The Abolitionists regard the Constitution with unabated affection." They have "nothing to ask except what the Constitution authorizes, no change to desire, except that the Constitution may be restored to its pristine republican purity." He speaks of "the ascendancy that slavery has acquired and the apprehension that it will soon overmaster the Constitution itself;" of the "usurpations on the part of the South and the unworthy concessions to it by the North"; and alludes to the Missouri

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Compromise "by which the nation was wheedled out of its honor." This characterized the means adopted by Mr. Clay to secure the passage of that measure. He said, too, that certain officials in New Hampshire and Vermont, who had spoken contemptuously of anti-slavery men, would "soon be made to see the grossness of their error." The letter clearly looked to political action. While Mr. Birney was preparing it, his friend, William Jay, who had adopted his views, was preparing his remarkable book on "*The Action of the Federal Government in Behalf of Slavery.*" This was published in 1838 and had a large circulation. A still larger and revised edition was published in 1839. Mr. Birney's efforts at New York were directed to strengthen the practical side of anti-slavery action; to stimulate local organization for obtaining legislative action in behalf of trial by jury and of personal liberty. Instead of centralizing, he preferred measures requiring discussion and action in every township and county. Four hundred and forty societies were organized in the first year; sixty lecturers, prudently chosen, and free from the "no-human-government" heresy, were sent out; and tracts and newspapers were liberally distributed. He visited in person the principal cities and lectured chiefly on the political encroachments of slavery; and, in the summer of 1838, at a large convention in Northern Ohio, he publicly declared his conviction that all the anti-slavery agitation would be sterile unless it resulted in the formation of a national political party. He thought the time had come. On his return to New York, he prepared a clear and terse statement of his reasons, and had it sent in lithographed form to all the leading anti-slavery men, soliciting their views in return. The discussion on this subject grew general and threatened disruption. At first, the majority was hostile; but

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the project gained friends rapidly. Elizur Wright, John G. Whittier, Alvan Stewart, Gerrit Smith, Beriah Green, William Goodell, Joshua Leavitt, Samuel Lewis, ex-Senator Thomas Morris, Dr. Brisbane, Thomas Earle, Myron Holley and other leaders concurred. The *Rochester Freeman* was chosen, because of its unofficial character, to be the first paper to advocate it; and it was followed by the *Emancipator*, *Friend of Man* and *Massachusetts Abolitionist;* but the *Liberator*, with its following, was hostile, and all the other anti-slavery papers either wavering or lukewarm. Six State anti-slavery societies condemned it. "Great numbers of *professed* Abolitionists were too closely wedded to their parties to abandon them," and a few had adopted the anarchical ideas of the "no-human-government" faction and were disposed rather to throw off all political responsibilities than to add to them. Mr. Birney remained firm. In the early part of 1839, he thus characterized the plan of questioning candidates and its fruitlessness:

"Our political movement, heretofore, may be compared to the wake of a vessel at sea, never increasing in length, no matter how many thousands of miles she may sail." * * "I look on the independent party movement as proof, not only of the greater force and energy of the anti-slavery cause, but of its greater expansion; and I am not more surprised at it than I would be at seeing the young of a noble bird, grown too large for the nest, and feeling its strength and courage equal to the attempt, committing itself to the bosom of the air and training its powers in the region of thunders and lightnings and storms."

It is to the writings of Mr. Birney and Wm. Jay that the student of the political aspects of the early anti-slavery movement must go for light. They are the armory from which the orators, platform makers and writers of the anti-slavery political party took their weapons for many years. The best history of the aggressions of the slave

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power may be found in the writings of Mr. Birney; and it was he who first presented in many lights the doctrine of the inherent antagonism of the free and slave labor systems, under a common government. The phrase "irrepressible conflict" uttered in 1860 by Mr. Seward, was used before 1840, by Mr. Birney. In 1840 he wrote:

"The conclusion of the whole matter is that as a people we are trying an experiment as unphilosophical in theory as it has been, and ever will be, found impossible in practice: to make a harmonious whole out of parts that are, in principle and essence, discordant. It is in vain to think of a sincere union between the North and the South, if the first remain true to her republican principles and habits and the latter persist in her slave-holding despotism. They are incapable from their natures of being made one. * * * 'One or the other must, in the end, gain the entire ascendency.'" (See letter of acceptance).

One of the most able and instructive documents of the anti-slavery conflict was Mr. Birney's letter of March, 1838, in answer to a demand for information about anti-slavery designs and measures, made upon him by Mr. Calhoun and other South Carolina Congressmen. The several letters of Mr. Elmore, who wrote in behalf of his colleagues, disclose the high respect felt by the South for Mr. Birney. In the one of May 5th he says:

"I heard of you as a man of intelligence, sincerity and truth: who, though laboring in a bad cause, did it with ability and from a mistaken conviction of its justice."

No man stood higher in the esteem of both friends and foes than the subject of this sketch. President Kellogg of Illinois, who visited England in 1844, four years after Mr. Birney's visit there, thus writes:

"It was truly refreshing to me while I was in Great Britain, amid the many complaints against my countrymen, to which I was obliged to listen, to hear excellent friend, James G. Birney, so frequently spoken of and always in terms of unqualified approbation and respect."

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As Mr. Birney had been for several months before the British public as a speaker, this tribute to him is valuable. No man who has taken a prominent part for twelve years in a heated controversy can have altogether escaped using personalities. The only occasion on which Mr. Birney ever used one was when he found himself obliged by Mr. Adams' course in Congress to warn Abolitionists to withhold their confidence from the man who had so nobly maintained the right of free mails, free press, free speech and free petition. For these services the Abolitionists had elected Mr. Adams to Congress, where he had refused to vote for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, or for rejecting the application of Florida for admission as a slave State; and he had spoken contemptuously of the characteristic doctrines of the voting Abolitionists. Mr. Birney in a published letter stated the facts and said:

"Mr. Adams owes much of his present popularity, may I not say nearly all? to his connection with the anti-slavery agitation. Abolitionists have contributed more than any other class of persons to swell the tide of his influence. That influence is now active in fortifying against them every practicable point at which they have attacked slavery in this country; and his *quasi* sympathy with them gives it an independent and unusual force." "His course in my judgment has been eccentric, whimsical and inconsistent; defended in part by weak and inconclusive not to say frivolous arguments; and taken as a whole, thus far, is unworthy of a statesman of large views and a right temper in a great national conjuncture."

So long as John Quincy Adams was true to right principles he had no better friend than James G. Birney. To Senators Morris, Chase, Sumner, and Wilson, as also to Slade, Giddings, Wilmot, Lovejoy and other true men in Congress, Mr. Birney always extended cordial sympathy. With his co-laborers, William Jay, the Tappans, Theodore

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D. Weld, Joshua Leavitt, H. B. Stanton, Elizur Wright, Beriah Green, Gerrit Smith, Samuel Lewis, Dr. Bailey, Dr. Brisbane, Jonathan Blanchard, Leicester King, William Goodell and other noble men he always lived in uninterrupted friendship. Between Mr. Weld and himself the relation was for life that of two brothers.

In 1838 it became his duty, as the leading representative of the political-action Abolitionists, to declare publicly what was already an accomplished fact,—that the "no-human government" faction at Boston had withdrawn itself from the main Abolition movement and ought to withdraw from the American Anti-slavery Society. He did this without reflecting upon the motives or honesty of individuals, putting it upon the ground that they had changed their views since joining the Society, the constitution and declaration of which recognized the U. S. Constitution and the law, both of which were rejected by the "no-human government," non-resistant, non-voting party. He said (See *Emancipator*, May 1, 1839):

"Could they be agreed and could they walk together? It seems to me not. And simply because their aim, their objects are radically and essentially different. So with the no-government and the pro-government Abolitionists. One party is for sustaining and purifying governments and bringing them into perfect conformity with the principles of divine government,—the other for destroying all government."

The fact is that the no-human government faction had covered up and lost sight of abolition, piling upon it a great number of temporary notions and transcendental absurdities such as: the sinfulness of force in all its manifestations, whether congresses, legislatures, courts or jails or slavery. With them it was a sin to vote for the abolition of slavery. Oddly enough they made an excep-

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tion in favor of petitioning; but they never explained how they could petition Congress to act when it could not act without sin! Mr. Garrison and Henry C. Wright were the leaders in this *ism* and the *Liberator* was used to propagate it. Mr. Birney's letter marked the point at which the voting Abolitionists went one way and the "no-human government" men another, never to meet again. The former organized in 1840 the Liberty party; the latter after running in full stream a little while, distributed itself into numerous rivulets, such as Grahamism, spiritualism, spirit materialization, photo-spiritism, abolition of money, secession, disunion, Henry Clayism, ruin of the church, overthrow of the clergy, "constitution a covenant with death and an agreement with hell," which were soon absorbed by the sands and dried up utterly. During the war, the non-resistants recanted their heresies and atoned for them as far as they could. At the present time, it is not likely that a single man exists, out of Russia, who holds the no-government, non-resistant notions; and although rhetorical attempts have been made to appropriate to Mr. Garrison as disciples, the Republican party, the Kansas settlers, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, it would puzzle a Garrisonian to prove these to have been non-resistants. Mrs. Stowe suggests that Mr. Garrison's denunciations of the Liberty party may have helped to build it up. Perhaps so: but the difficulty was that among his numerous *isms*, he claimed Abolitionism, and popular prejudice long held the Liberty party responsible for all of them. The relation between Mr. G. and the *political* Abolitionists was something like that now existing between Kernan of the *Okalona States* and the Democrats, or between O'Donovan Rossa and the party of Irish independence; he brought discredit on them although they disowned him.

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In August, 1839, Mr. Birney's father died intestate, leaving two heirs. The property consisted of money and twenty-seven slaves. Mr. Birney took the slaves, setting off twenty thousand dollars to his co-heir as their value, freed them and provided homes for them. Nearly all of them turned out well.

In the autumn of 1839 a convention of anti-slavery men in western New York nominated James G. Birney for President of the United States. He declined, his view being that the candidacy would cripple his usefulness, that the convention was not national, and that longer discussion would better unite the anti-slavery men. Upon all his friends he urged the propriety of nominating the Hon. William Jay, who was in every way competent, and who had contributed to the cause the best book on its political aspects. But Mr. Jay and all the friends of the movement insisted that he should be the standard bearer. No other name was considered at any subsequent convention, State or national, for the campaigns of 1840 and 1844. On the 2d of April, 1840, a national convention, held in Albany, nominated James G. Birney for President, and Thomas Earle for Vice-President. A still larger general convention was held at New York, May 11, 1840, and ratified the nominations. The ensuing campaign was marked by a popular frenzy seldom equaled in this country. It is known in political history as the "log cabin and hard cider campaign." Trivial issues took precedence of vital ones. Abolitionists were courted by Gen. Harrison and wheedled by Horace Greeley into the support of two Virginians, both pledged to the slave-power. It was impossible, too, to get correct returns of ballots cast, the Abolition vote not being considered that of a regular party organization; about seven thousand votes, however, were returned.

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The party had not given itself a name, and was known during the campaign by several names: Anti-slavery, Abolition, True Democrat, Liberty and Republican. The result of the campaign was very encouraging.

May 12, 1841, a large national Anti-slavery convention was held at New York, and unanimously nominated Mr. Birney for President, with ex-Senator Thomas Morris for Vice-President. This nomination was not accepted, being regarded by him as premature. August 30, 1843, a large national convention at Buffalo renominated the ticket in the name of the "Liberty Party," which name had gradually supplanted other names in popular usage.

In the campaign of 1844, it was generally calculated that the number of anti-slavery voters was about one hundred thousand; the managers of the Liberty Party expected more. The voting in 1843 in the different States had revealed a steadily increasing party strength; and neither of the candidates of the two large parties had apparently any prospect of gaining any votes among anti-slavery men. Mr. Polk was a slave-holder, and Mr. Clay was not only a slave-holder but the most able representative of the slave power. It was Mr. Clay who had succeeded in gaining the admission of Missouri as a slave State, the greatest political crime in our country's annals; it was Mr. Clay who had, as Secretary of State, negotiated with Great Britain for pay for slaves; and it was Mr. Clay who had been the bitter assailant of Abolitionists and advised their exclusion from social life. Besides, he was notoriously a gambler and duellist, and, for that reason alone, not a popular candidate in the North. His nomination was a defiance of the anti-slavery men of the country who had, in sundry conventions, denounced him as an enemy. As the campaign waxed hot

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and chances were seen to be about equal, Democrats and Whigs alike appealed to the anti-slavery men for votes. As the election drew near and Clay's chances were seen to be growing less, the appeals of the Whigs became almost frantic. Horace Greeley, then a violent Whig partisan, but who had for years, in the N. Y. *Tribune*, adopted a friendly tone toward the Abolitionists, and who had thought himself able to deliver their votes to his chief, Mr. Clay, redoubled his entreaties, arguments and appeals. David Lee Childs, editor of the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, the Garrisonian organ at New York, apostatized both from Garrisonianism and anti-slavery, and threw his iufluence publicly for Clay. The Whig papers abounded in false statements. Mr. Birney was abused and cajoled by turns. The last resort of the Whigs was the "Garland forgery," concocted by the Whig Central Committee of Michigan. It purported to be a letter from James G. Birney to one Garland, a resident of his Legislative District in Michigan, soliciting the Democratic nomination for the Legislature and declaring his Democracy and his intention to defeat Henry Clay. It purported to be duly sworn to and to be printed on an extra of the *Oakland Gazette*. This infamous document was printed at New York by the Whigs in immense quantities, and sent to active Whigs in every county in the Northern States, with instructions not to circulate it until after the first of November. In western New York it was withheld until the 3rd, on which day it was known that Mr. Birney, who had been in the State for about a month, expected to leave Buffalo in a steamboat for Detroit. He did not leave on that day, and a copy of the forgery fell into his hands. As far as possible he contradicted it; but it was too late to expose the political crime fully. The *National Intelli-*

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gencer, Portland Advertiser, and *Ohio State Journal* were among the papers that published this forgery; and the Whig State committee of Indiana issued a public address containing it; but the contrivers of the use made of the forgery were doubtless at New York. The probable knowledge by Horace Greeley of this electioneering trick and the evasiveness of his disclaimer put an end to the friendly relations between him and Mr. Birney. Mr. Greeley gave orders that Mr. Birney's name should not be mentioned in the *Tribune* thereafter, and carefully avoided all mention of it in his large work on the history of the anti-slavery conflict, except in the election returns. His bitter malice ended only with Mr. Birney's death. The effect of the "Garland forgery" probably was to diminish Mr. Birney's vote at least half. In Ohio, where it was not exposed except in the northeastern part of the State, Mr. Birney lost several thousand votes, most of which went to Mr. Clay. The Whigs carried the State by a plurality of between four and five thousand. In New York the Whigs gained largely, but not enough by 5,107 to carry the State. In spite of the forgery the Liberty party polled 62,263 votes in all the States.

This staunchness of the anti-slavery men in 1844 saved the party from disbandment. In 1848 there was a large accession from the Democratic party, and it polled 291,000 votes; in 1852 many of the VanBuren men fell off, but it polled 156,000 votes; in 1856, on the breaking up of the Whig party for want of any principle of cohesion, the anti-slavery party polled over 1,300,000: and in 1860 it elected its ticket. Whether under the name of Anti-slavery party, Liberty, Free Soil or Republican, its main political principle was unchanged. September 3, 1835, the officers and Executive Committee of the Amer-

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ican Anti-slavery Society, in an address signed by them, said: "We hold that Congress has no more right to abolish slavery in the Southern States than Congress has in the West India Islands." In 1840 the platform of the party was the "abolition of slavery wherever it exists under the exclusive jurisdiction of Congress and to prevent its further extension," etc. In 1841 the Liberty party of Ohio resolved: "That we expressly disclaim, in behalf of the general Government, all right to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists." The party was not a whit more conservative in 1860 than in 1840.

In the summer of 1845 Br. Birney, who was then residing in Michigan, was thrown from a horse. A stroke of paralysis followed which disabled him for public life. He had a genial and happy old age, surrounded by relatives and friends. He lost none of his interest in the progress of the struggle, and, after the breaking out of the Kansas difficulties, he gave up the hope that slavery would be peaceably abolished but thought the aggressions of the slave power would lead to civil war He died in 1857.

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THE CHIEF WRITINGS OF MR. BIRNEY WERE AS FOLLOWS:

1. *Ten letters on Slavery and Colonization*, addressed to R R. Gurley, the first dated July 12, 1832, the last December 11, 1833.

2. *Six essays on same*, published in the Huntsville (Ala.) *Advocate*, in May, June and July, 1833.

3. *Letter on Colonization*, resigning Vice-presidency of Ky. Colonization Society, July 15, 1834.

4. *Letters to Presbyterian Church*, 1834.

5. *Addresses and Speeches*, 1835.

6. *Vindication of the Abolitionists*, 1835.

7. *The Philanthropist*, a weekly newspaper, 1836 and to Sept., 1837.

8. *Letter to Col. Stone*, May, 1836.

9. *Address to Slaveholders*, October, 1836.

10. *Argument on Fugitive Slave Case*, 1837.

11. *Letter to F. H. Elmore*, of South Carolina, 1838.

12. *Political Obligations of Abolitionists*, 1839.

13. *Report on the Duty of Political Action*, for Executive Committee of the American Anti-slavery Society, May. 1839.

14. *American Churches the Bulwarks of American Slavery*, 1840.

15. *Speeches in England*, 1840.

16. *Letter of Acceptance*.

17. *Articles in Q. A. S. Magazine and Emancipator*, 1837—1844.

18. *Examination of the Decision of the U. S. Supreme Court*, in the case of Strader *et al.*, *vs.* Graham, 1850.

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